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An Alternative History of the Grail Quest

The doctoral thesis in English literature, entitled « Representations of the Grail Quest in Medieval and Modern Literature », was directed by Dr Raluca L. Radulescu and Prof Tony Brown. The thesis was presented on January 31, 2014, at the School of English, Bangor University.

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- 1 The thesis explores the representation and meaning of the Grail quest in medieval and modern literature, using the methodologies of historically informed criticism and gender criticism. It opens new perspectives on the Grail quest, regarding the quest as a unifying structural and moral motif that enables medieval and modern authors to engage with core existential issues – death, gender relations and history – in a unique way, influenced by the socio-historical context in which the texts were written. The corpus of texts encompasses medieval French and English Arthurian romances on the one hand – the anonymous *Queste del Saint Graal* and Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* – and the modern American, British and French novels that use medievalist tropes, notably the Grail quest, on the other hand – Walker Percy's *Lancelot*, David Lodge's *Small World* and Michel Zink's *Déodat*.
- 2 Comparing two sets of texts originating in different historical contexts advances our understanding of each text, because not only are the modern texts influenced by their medieval precursors, but also our perception of medieval Grail quest romances is modified by modern literature. Moreover, studying medieval and modern Grail quest literature side by side offers new insights into the phenomenon of modern medievalism¹; this approach brings out the differences between the Grail quest in texts composed in a



society that shared a set of Christian values and those produced in a post-religious context. Research conducted in the thesis shows that the texts within each group differ from each other, highlighting the diversity and dynamism within medieval and modern societies themselves.

- 3 The medieval texts studied in the thesis are Thomas Malory's « Tale of the Sankgreal », – part of the *Morte Darthur* –, and its source, the anonymous French *Queste del Saint Graal* – part of the so-called Vulgate cycle of romance ². Malory's romance remains popular among both medievalists and the general public, but the study of the « Sankgreal » is not always accompanied by a comparison to its original source in French, which Malory followed closely. In the last decades, the *Queste* has been extensively studied, mostly by French scholars ³. However, with some exceptions, there is no substantial scholarship of either « Sankgreal » or the *Queste* that would seriously consider the importance of non-elect, minor or women characters in relation to the elect and major characters of the romances ⁴.
- 4 The modern novel writers, however, compensate for the scholarly lack of interest in minor characters. The three novels studied in the thesis allude to Malory's *Morte* and the *Queste*, but the modern writers treat the heroism of Lancelot, Perceval and Galahad sceptically. Walker Percy's novel *Lancelot* (1977) was inspired by Sidney Lanier's adaptation of Malory's *Morte*, yet Percy's eponymous « hero » is a psychiatric patient, drunkard and criminal. David Lodge in *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984) makes one of his main characters, Persse, a self-conscious quester, who is comically determined to preserve his moral and physical virginity in the midst of « immoral » academic community. Finally, the French medievalist Michel Zink in his novel *Déodat, ou la transparence* (2002), which is based on the *Queste* and other medieval sources, dismisses the elect knights Galahad and Perceval to the narrative periphery, concentrating instead on the experience of an obscure boy, Déodat ⁵.
- 5 Despite the growth of studies in the field of medievalism, there has been no attempt to compare closely medieval and modern representations of the Grail quest. Studies of the Grail quest that mention both medieval and modern texts usually concentrate on one period ⁶. Thus, the thesis contributes to the study of medieval and modern Grail quest literary traditions in English and French. The thesis invites the readers to review their perceptions of well-known medieval texts, which are studied from the perspective of minor, non-elect and episodic characters. Moreover, the thesis introduces the English audience to current French scholarship on the Grail quest literature and raises the awareness of modern Grail quest novels that have so far received little attention in the context of Arthurian studies.
- 6 The Introduction to the thesis tackles the question of why modern society needs the Grail quest, a motif routed in medieval culture that had a very different set of values. The aim of the chapter is to outline the role of medievalism in modern culture and the place of Arthuriana and the Grail quest within it. Subsequently, the chapter provides an overview of the project and its rationale, the sources and the methodology. The chapter also explains the reasons for concentrating on medieval and modern periods and for leaving out the early modern and Victorian periods, because the Romantic and Victorian versions of the Grail quest differ substantially from both medieval and modern Grail quest literature. Finally, the organisation of the book and its thematic arrangement are explained.

- 7 In chapter 1 of the thesis, I consider the theoretical underpinnings of chivalry, which underlay the narratives of the *Queste* and the « Sankgreal ». The ideology of medieval chivalry is an extensive field, so only two authors are discussed in the chapter : St Benedict, whose vision of spiritual chivalry is essential for reading the *Queste*, and Ramon Lull, whose works are important for the discussion of Malory's representation of chivalry in the « Sankgreal ». Next, I examine the material expression of chivalric ideas, namely, the manuscript and early printed book tradition in which the *Queste* and the « Sankgreal » were preserved. I show that the popularity of the *Queste* and the « Sankgreal » in the Middle Ages and beyond makes these two texts particularly important for studying both medieval and modern concepts of the Grail quest. I also argue that the episodes of medieval romances examined in Chapters 2-4 are essential in the development of the plot and in the main characters' quest, which is confirmed by the manuscripts' and early printed books' illustrative programmes.
- 8 Death was an ever-present contingency in the life of a medieval knight. Remarkably, throughout the Grail quest, the only knights who find their lives endangered are not only non-elect but also minor, those who receive little mention in the *Queste* and the « Sankgreal ». Although at the beginning of the *Mort Artu* it is mentioned that Sir Gawain murdered eighteen Arthurian knights, and there were others casualties as well, only three knights' wounding and death are described in the course of the Grail quest : these knights are King Bagdemagus, Sir Yvain l'Avoutre and Sir Calogrenant. After the quest is achieved, Galahad leaves this world, followed by Perceval, but their deaths are peaceful, in difference from the violent deaths of non-elect knights. Chapter 2 demonstrates how the non-elect knights' deaths compare to the deaths of Sir Galahad and Sir Perceval, arguing that the deaths of the non-elect and the elect knights are exemplary of contemporary ideas and practices associated with death and dying – the composition of wills, performance of the last rights and funeral practices.
- 9 In Chapter 3, I study two episodes in which Sir Lancelot and Sir Perceval spend time with female recluses, who give the knights spiritual advice. These recluses are quite unique, because knights are more usually instructed by hermits in both the *Queste* and the « Sankgreal », as well as in other chivalric romances. The analysis of these episodes, in which the knights mostly listen to recluses, contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of gender and power on the Grail quest. Moreover, the chapter shows that the recluses influence the knights by their example as well as by their words, leading Lancelot and Perceval to adopt a more patient attitude and to rely on God's mercy rather than on their own prowess.
- 10 Chapter 4 focuses on the intersections between the world history, genealogy and the individual quester's fortunes, using the example of Solomon's ship episode. The flawed couple of King Solomon and his « evyl wyff », to use Malory's words, is contrasted to the perfect, spiritually united couple of Galahad and Perceval's sister. The chapter begins by tracing attitudes towards marriage in the ecclesiastical discourse in England and France from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, including the importance of marriage for individual salvation as well as the roles and behaviours expected of spouses in marriage. Next, I compare the treatment of Solomon and his wife in the *Estoire del Saint Graal* – which precedes the *Queste* in the Vulgate cycle, but was probably composed later than the *Queste* –, the *Queste* and the « Sankgreal ». I demonstrate that, while Solomon's wife falls short of the expected or ideal behaviour for a wife, Perceval's sister acts towards Galahad

with diffidence and affection (*affectio*) a good wife was expected to display, thus becoming an ideal companion for Galahad – but their union is still spiritual rather than carnal.

- 11 Part II of the thesis is devoted to the Grail quest in three modern novels. Given the chronological and cultural gap between medieval Grail quest romances and modern literature, it is only natural that the Grail quest in the modern novels, which provide material for Chapters 5-7, will have a very different form and meaning. However, there is good reason for comparing the medieval and modern Grail quest versions directly, rather than considering early modern, Romantic and Victorian manifestations of medievalism, because the latter medievalist versions of the Grail quest are very distinct from both their medieval forerunners and their modern « heirs ». Thus, for Victorian authors, this quest is directed towards the achievement of a local and moral aim rather than towards the spiritual redemption of a particular group of people. Meanwhile, in both medieval romances and modern novels considered in Chapters 5-7, the quest is aimed at the redemption of a particular group, if not of all mankind.
- 12 Moreover, by focusing on minor characters, women and non-elect knights – who have previously been little studied – in Chapters 1-4, I provide a bridge between medieval and modern versions of the Grail quest. The experiences of medieval characters who appear on the margins of the main narrative are instrumental for understanding both the context in which the romances' major characters operate and the image of questers in modern literature, which often places the unheroic, ordinary or even deviant characters into the limelight. The modern novels studied in Chapters 5-7 use the Christian motif of the Grail quest to structure their narratives, adopting medieval tropes for a post-religious age. Unsurprisingly, modern authors prioritise the perspective of minor, marginal or ordinary, unheroic characters, which results in decentralizing the authoritative « master narrative » of the medieval Grail quest. The modern novel presents a new type of quester – a flawed, imperfect individual, essentially different from the superhuman Galahad, and this change encourages the reader to sympathise with the Grail questers. In medieval romances, non-elect knights also provide certain models, which the original readers could repudiate or sympathise with, because not everyone could expect to reach Sir Galahad's level of perfection, albeit, as a Christian, everyone was called to aspire to this ideal. Indeed, medieval non-elect knights and minor characters can provide a foil to the elect questers and major characters at the same time as nuancing their experiences.
- 13 In fact, some aspects of modern Grail quest literature can be better accessed by a scholar of the Middle Ages than by a modernist. In the *Queste* and the « Sankgreal », the questers' achievement constitutes a kind of redemption of chivalry, despite the fact that the earthly Round Table fellowship is destroyed in the succeeding narratives – the French *Mort* and the last book of Malory's *Morte*. Likewise, in Walker Percy's *Lancelot*, the main characters, Lancelot and Percival, strive for the moral and spiritual redemption of contemporary America. In David Lodge's *Small World*, Persse MacGarrigle « saves » the discipline of literary criticism from the aridity and stagnation that would overtake it if a single literary theory triumphed, and, as I show in Chapter 6, Lodge's academic novel presents, in microcosm, the more general concerns of modern society. Michel Zink's protagonist, Déodat, in the eponymous novel *Déodat, ou la transparence*, not only realizes that spiritual transparency and charity can bring the individual closer to God, but also tries to share his revelation with the people he meets, Yvain the Knight of the Lion and the girl at the well. In a sense, modern questers, like Galahad, strive and occasionally

succeed in « redeeming » the modern post-religious world from the loss of meaning associated with the denial of belief in spiritual reality.

- 14 The Conclusion returns to the phenomenon of modern medievalism and summarizes the links between the medieval and modern Grail quest narratives. It highlights those aspects of medieval culture that are particularly attractive in the modern world, namely, strategies of coping with death and bereavement, gender relations and ideas about family and history. These issues, which were far from controversial in late medieval France and England, appear in retrospect as unproblematic and reassuring to modern audiences of medieval romances. The authors of the modern Grail quest novels, however, do not use this nostalgia for the Middle Ages uncritically, warning their readers that medieval societies had their own problems.
- 15 By closely engaging with medieval and modern versions of the Grail quest and by examining the medieval romances through the experience of minor and non-elect characters, the thesis offers a new perspective not only on the studied texts but also on the entire tradition of the Grail quest in medieval and modern literature. Moreover, the thesis contributes to the burgeoning field of medievalist studies, showing how modern texts can reveal new meanings when examined in the light of medieval tradition to which they allude, both directly and indirectly.

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NOTES

1. On academic to approaches to medievalism in Francophone and Anglophone scholarship, see M. GALLY and V. FERRÉ, « Médiévistes et modernistes face au médiéval », *Perspectives médiévales*, 35 (2014), [<http://peme.revues.org/5761>] ; DOI : 10.4000/peme.5761 [October 30, 2014].

2. A. PAUPHILET (ed.), *La Queste del Saint Graal, Roman du XIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1923 ; E. VINAVER (ed.), P. J. C. FIELD (rev), *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3 vol., Oxford, 1990.

3. A comprehensive and up-to-date list of the *Queste* bibliography is available on the ARLIMA database, [www.arlima.net/qt/queste_del_saint_graal.html] ; October 30, 2014]. See also the bibliography issued as part of *Programme d'agrégation 2004-2005, Loxias*, 7, 2004. Important earlier studies were reprinted in D. HÜE, and S. MENEGALDO (eds), *Les chemins de « La queste »*. *Études sur « La queste del saint Graal »*, Orléans, 2004. In writing the thesis, I also found very helpful E. BAUMGARTNER, *L'arbre et le pain. Essai sur « La Queste del Saint Graal »*, Paris, 1981.

4. There have been, for instance, some studies of hermits in the *Queste* – see, for instance, P. JONIN, « Des premiers ermites à ceux de *La Queste del Saint Graal* », *Annales de la faculté des lettres et sciences humaines d'Aix*, 44 (1968), p. 293-350, repr. in *Les chemins de « La queste »*, p. 203-223 ; for the study of hermits in the Vulgate cycle, see I. WEILL, « Le Clerc et “l’hermite pseudome” dans le “Lancelot-Graal” », in *Le clerc au Moyen Âge*, Aix-en-Provence, 1995 [<http://books.openedition.org/pup/2499>] ; November 17, 2014]. However, female recluses, who are discussed in Chapter 3 of the thesis, have been previously considered only by I. VEDRENNE-FAJOLLES, « À propos des recluses de la *Queste del Saint Graal* (ca 1225-1230) », *Loxias, littératures française et comparée [revue électronique, CTCL, U. de Nice]*, 7 (2004) [<http://revel.unice.fr/loxias/index.html?id=95>] ; October 30, 2014].

5. W. PERCY, *Lancelot*, New York, 1977 ; D. LODGE, *Small World : An Academic Romance*, London, 1984 ; M. ZINK, *Déodat. Un roman du Graal*, Paris, 2002. Michel Zink's works on medieval French literature, especially Arthurian romances, are discussed both in Part 1 (Chapters 1-4) and in Chapter 7 of the thesis. Of particular relevance here are *Poésie et conversion au Moyen Âge*, Paris, 2003 and *La Subjectivité littéraire autour du siècle de saint Louis*, Paris, 1985, transl. D. SICES, *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity*, Baltimore and London, 1999.
6. Accordingly, R. Olderman focuses on the American novels that explore the motif of the waste land, but he does not consider the medieval sources of the motif – R. OLDERMAN, *Beyond the Waste Land : A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties*, New Haven, 1972. In turn, J. B. Marino provides a summary of medieval Grail quest romances before embarking on a study that seems to encompass all modern Grail quest fiction written in English – J. B. MARINO, *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*, Cambridge, 2008. A. Lupack and B. T. Lupack consider the development of American Arthurian literature, including the Grail quest motif, from its origins, but do not, naturally, discuss medieval sources. As a result, the section on Walker Percy's novels relates the writer's work to the American tradition of Arthurian literature, but not to medieval literature, of which Percy shows at least some awareness in his novels – A. LUPACK and B. T. LUPACK, *King Arthur in America*, Cambridge and Rochester, 2001. A notable exception to the tendency to concentrate on either medieval or modern period is the collections of essays, which can encompass medieval and modern literature, as well as cinema, art and music. *The Arthurian Way of Death* brings together essays that extend from medieval through Victorian to modern Arthuriana, the collection, however, is restricted to the English tradition – K. CHEREWATUK and K. S. WHETTER (eds), *The Arthurian Way of Death. The English Tradition*, Cambridge and Rochester, 2009 (*Arthurian Studies*, 74). On the other hand, *The Grail, the Quest, and the World of King Arthur*, provides material mostly on medieval Grail quest literature and art in different European traditions, with only the last three chapters out of fourteen considering the Grail in post-medieval context – N. J. LACY (ed.), *The Grail, the Quest, and the World of King Arthur*, Cambridge and Rochester, 2008 (*Arthurian Studies*, 72).

INDEX

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